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# Agent Orange at Okinawa's Futenma Base in 1980s　１９８０年代普天間基地のオレンジ剤

**Jon Mitchell**

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The U.S. Marine Corps buried a massive stockpile of Agent Orange at the Futenma air station in Okinawa, seriously sickening the base's former head of maintenance and potentially contaminating nearby residents and the ground beneath the base. The barrels were abandoned in Okinawa at the end of the Vietnam War - when the U.S. government banned the dioxin-laden defoliant for health reasons — and were buried at the installation in the city of Ginowan after the Pentagon ignored repeated requests to safely dispose of them, according to the veterans who served at the installation in the 1970s and 1980s.

**Deep deception: The worksite where Kris Roberts unearthed over 100 leaking barrels is seen in a photo taken in summer 1981. KRIS ROBERTS**

Closing down Futenma has been the center of a bitter 16-year struggle by Tokyo and Washington to realign U.S. forces on the island - and a recent poll by Ryukyu Shimpo showed that 90% of Okinawans were opposed to the base. ("Ninety percent of people in Okinawa oppose Henoko relocation plan", Ryukyu Shimpo, May 9, 2012.) These latest allegations are likely to raise fears that even after Futenma's eventual shutdown, the land beneath the base will be too poisoned for civilian use for decades, as is the case with former U.S. installations that stored Agent Orange in South Vietnam.

One of the veterans who made the claims of the burial is retired Lt. Col. Kris Roberts, 57, who was in overall charge of maintenance projects at U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma.

In summer 1981, after being notified by ranking officers that monitoring showed "unacceptably high readings" of chemicals in the wastewater flowing off the facility, Roberts said he and his construction crew began digging in an area near the end of the runway.

"I assumed they were talking about a fuel leak but when we started digging near the storm pipes, we unearthed over 100 barrels buried in rows. They were rusty and leaking and we could see orange markings around some of their middles," Roberts, now a state representative in New Hampshire, said in a recent interview.

The dangers of Agent Orange — which took its name from the color of the stripes around the drums in which it was stored — were still not widely known in the early 1980s. But Roberts said his suspicions were aroused by the reaction of his higher brass to the discovery.

"Our commanding officer immediately declared the area off-limits to other service personnel. Then, instead of following standard procedures and removing the barrels to a secure area on the base for disposal, they were loaded onto trucks by Okinawan workers and transported off the installation. The commanding officer didn't want anyone to know what we had dug up."

Soon after the barrels had been removed, a typhoon inundated the site. "It threatened to flood the runway so my crew and I climbed into the water to open the release gates. The water had a chemical film on it from the leaking barrels. Eventually, we managed to drain the contaminated water off the base."

Due to his contact with the barrels' contents, Roberts, a former medal-winning marathon runner, fell sick with heart problems, prostate cancer and precursors of lung cancer — diseases that his doctor states are a result of exposure to Agent Orange.

Concerned that his fellow crew members were also poisoned, Roberts has repeatedly urged the U.S. Marine Corps and Department of Veterans Affairs to contact them, but his requests have been ignored, he said.

Roberts also worries that Okinawan base workers were exposed and he regrets their treatment during the incident. "Those men were easily replaced. So if we told an Okinawan worker to do something, they did it. It wasn't fair."

During the past year, more than 30 U.S. veterans have spoken out about the use of Agent Orange in Okinawa during the Vietnam War, when the island served as a major supply post for the American military. Some of these former service members have testified about the use of Agent Orange on the island up to the mid-1970s - despite the Pentagon's assertions that it stopped using the herbicides in Vietnam in 1971. These are the first revelations of its existence on Okinawa as recently as the 1980s.

**Kris Roberts**

The Department of Veterans Affairs has awarded compensation to at least three veterans sickened by these chemicals on Okinawa yet the Pentagon continues to deny that the defoliant was ever present on the island. The Japanese government has refused to conduct tests within bases which had allegedly stored Agent Orange and recently, Okinawa Prefecture turned down requests by citizens to survey former base workers, citing the damage such surveys might do to the local (tourist and farming) economy.

The refusal angered Kawamura Masami of NGO Citizens' Network for Biodiversity in Okinawa - the group leading the struggle for a full investigation into the issue.

“We reminded the prefecture that it’s their responsibility to protect Okinawan people’s life, health and the environment. But the prefectural government has not fulfilled that responsibility. We again requested that they carry out fact-finding inquiries, including interviews with former workers on US base and research archive material in Okinawa, all of which can be done independently without relying upon or intervention from the US or Japanese government.” (See "Okinawa NGO discusses with Okinawa Prefecture over Agent Orange."

Among the dozens of veterans to go public about the defoliant on Okinawa is Carlos Garay, a former marine who served in the Headquarters and Maintenance Squadron at Futenma in 1975. Garay claims he saw 12 barrels of Agent Orange that had been left at the installation after the end of the Vietnam War.

"Additionally, other squadrons were directing their leftover stocks to us for disposal, so I sent messages to the Department of Defense and Headquarters of the Marine Corps, but they never replied. The barrels were still there when I left in 1976," he said.

**In the field: Kris Roberts appears in uniform in this undated photo taken during his 21 years of service. KRIS ROBERTS**

Garay's account and Roberts' discovery of the barrels suggest confusion among the top brass over how to remove the stocks of Agent Orange that were never officially supposed to have been present in Okinawa.

Between 1961 and 1971, the U.S. military sprayed 76 million liters of herbicides in Southeast Asia to rob its enemies of crops and jungle cover, but their use was halted after studies linked the chemicals to birth defects and serious illnesses.

In 1972, the U.S. removed its stockpiles of Agent Orange from South Vietnam. The Pentagon has always maintained that these stocks were taken directly to Johnston Island in the North Pacific for disposal. However, a 2003 report titled *“An ecological assessment of Johnston Atoll”* produced by the Chemical Materials Agency of the Department of the Army casts doubt on the Pentagon’s claim that the stocks were sent directly to Johnston Island and raises the possibility that large quantities of the defoliant were stored in Okinawa.

Discovered by independent researcher John Olin, the report details the transportation of Agent Orange to Okinawa. It states:

“In 1972, the US Air Force brought 25,000 55-gallon drums of the chemical , herbicide Orange (HO) to Johnston Island that originated from Vietnam and was stored on Okinawa.”

The statement, which flies in the face of U.S. military denials, is currently the subject of a slew of Freedom of Information Act requests to secure the primary documents upon the report was based.

The presence of 1.3m gallons of Agent Orange on Okinawa is a terrifying prospect. Scientists researching the dangers of Agent Orange in South Vietnam have discovered that because its highly poisonous dioxin is not dissolved by rainwater, it can remain in the soil, poisoning people for decades. In southern Vietnam today, there are more than 20 dioxin hot spots at sites that were used by the U.S. military to store Agent Orange. The Vietnamese Red Cross has estimated that approximately 3 million citizens are suffering from exposure to these herbicides with life-threatening illnesses including cancers, diabetes and birth defects. A third generation of children poisoned by these chemicals show the appalling damage that they reek at a genetic level over half a century after they were first used by the U.S. military. (See, for example, Fred A. Wilcox, Scorched Earth (Seven Stories Press, New York, 2011.)

Near Futenma, which locals have dubbed "the world's most dangerous military base" because of its proximity to residential areas, there are 20 schools, including 10 elementary schools. Some are located close to the area where the barrels were found and the contaminated water was expelled.

Iha Yoichi, mayor of Ginowan from 2003 to 2010, stated in an interview that the U.S. Marine Corps failed to notify the Ginowan Municipal Government of the leakage in 1981 and he worries that the area may still be poisoned by dioxin due to the topography beneath the base, which consists of many caves and natural springs.

"If the dioxin is still in the soil, then we can confirm its presence with sampling. But the Japanese government won't grant permission to conduct such tests within U.S. installations in Okinawa," Iha said.

The U.S. military — which under Japanese law is not responsible for cleaning up former bases returned to civilian usage — has an unenviable track record of polluting its installations in Okinawa.

In 1995, the Onna Communication Site was returned to civilian use, but the area has yet to be redeveloped due to contamination from pollutants, including mercury and highly toxic PCBs. In 1999, dangerous levels of lead and carcinogenic hexavalent chromium were found in the soil after the partial closure of the Kadena Ammunition Depot.

Last summer, a U.S. veteran's account of the 1969 burial of hundreds of barrels of Agent Orange in what is today a popular tourist area in Chatan Town alarmed local residents.

Explaining why the army buried the barrels, the veteran, who did not want his name to be revealed due to fears of repercussions from the Department of Veterans Affairs, said: "It was cheaper to bury stuff than to ship it back to the States for proper disposal. It's what the military always did on Okinawa."

According to Hayashi Kiminori, an expert on U.S. base pollution, "The leakage of Agent Orange on Futenma must have exposed local residents and the environment to these toxins."

Hayashi suggests a clear way forward to investigate Roberts's allegations concerning Agent Orange on Futenma:

"It is necessary to gather the accounts of those involved in the digging up and transportation of the barrels as soon as possible before their memories fade. Their testimony will be crucial in order to decontaminate the ground in the future. After collecting these, the Japanese government and prefecture of Okinawa should firmly relay their findings to the U.S. military to clear up this problem."

This is a revised and expanded version of an article that originally appeared in *The Japan Times.*

**Jon Mitchell** is a *Welsh-born writer based in Yokohama and represented by Curtis Brown Ltd., New York.* On 15 May 2012, Ryukyu Asahi Broadcasting aired an hour-long documentary based upon Jon's research called 枯れ葉剤を浴びた島 - Defoliated Island. This was followed by a 90-minute program - *The Scoop Special* - aired by TV-Asahi on 20 May 2012. *He has written widely on Okinawan social issues for the Japanese and American press - a selection of which can be found* here. *He teaches at Tokyo Institute of Technology and is an Asia-Pacific Journal associate.*

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